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ABSTRACT

It is contended that a person becomes an underachiever because of: (1) personality or psychological problems; (2) poor school preparation; (3) working toward underachievement as an assertion of independence; (4) inadequate self concept; and (5) poor impulse control. The bulk of the paper is devoted to describing the bases and procedures of two group approaches which the author uses with underachievers. One of these, the Human Potential Seminar, is specifically designed for those persons who are not using their potentiality but would like to be. The process is described. The other approach, termed Success Groups, focuses on those students who underachieve in order to demonstrate independence or retain dependence on their parents. These "committed" underachievers must be interrupted in their efforts. Contracts are made with the group and written commitments to specific grade point achievement goals are demanded. While academic achievement is the overall goal (success rate = 72%), results also indicate markedly improved self concepts. (TL)

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HUMAN POTENTIAL SEMINARS: AN APPROACH TO TURNING ON THE GIFTED UNDERACHIEVER

BY

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In order to try to be consistent with my philosophy that education should be a dialogue, I will attempt to make this presentation take the form of a dialogue insofar as that is possible within a monologue. That is, I will raise questions which you might be expected to raise. Actually, I think my chief contribution on the theme of turning on gifted underachievers is to deal with the question of how an underachiever becomes an underachiever and how he might become an achiever.

The first question to be raised, however, is that of how is underachievement defined?

I think I may see it a bit differently than many people since I define underachievement so as to include all of us in this room. In terms of our vast potentiality as human beings, each of us is an underachiever. Some of the researchers in Human Potential suggest that none of us uses more than 10% of our potentiality. Within this definition of underachievement, there are, of course, varying degrees of underachievement. So when we talk about turning on the bright underachievers, I become a bit concerned. I think the very designation of being termed bright but unsuccessful reinforces a failure identity. When counselors, teachers, and parents remind students that they are not achieving up to their potentiality, they are reinforcing failure not success. But if underachievement can be understood to include all of us, and if we can acknowledge that each of us is gifted, then it becomes exciting to try to find ways to turn on the gifted underachiever - ourselves included.

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But then the question arises, "how does a person become an underachiever?" Is it due to poor school preparation in such skills as reading, writing, thinking, and so on? Or is it the result of psychological disturbance in the family, at school or inside the individual himself?

Underachievement is sometimes caused by any of these things. But two other factors can be involved also. As you know, not all underachievement is the same.

What else could be involved?

In the first place, low regard for self or poor self-concept seems to be present in all underachievement no matter what else is involved. What it amounts to is that students achieve to their level of self-image and self-confidence. So do we. In the second place, some students <u>work</u> toward underachievement.

What do we mean?

I think the issue of dependence and independence becomes crucial for many high school and college students. Underachievement can be related to how they handle these matters. For instance, if an adolescent rebels, he may deliberately do everything he can not to achieve in school. That provides him with a feeling of independence - especially if his parents or teachers are pushing him to do well in school. Dr. Robert Pitcher* calls this type of underachievement adolescent reaction or passive - aggressive reaction, depending on whether the rebellion is conscious or unconscious. But this is only one way of responding to the independence - dependence issue. Another student may fear independence. He is afraid of growing up. Unconsciously he, too, works toward non-achievement. To succeed academically is to be forced to leave home. Thus, his unconsciously chosen goal is non-achievement and continuing dependence.

Is there any other common denominator for underachievers?

Not that I can see for underachievers in general. But I do wonder if a lot of adolescent underachievers (as underachievement has been traditionally understood) are having a great deal of difficulty in controlling their impulses. They are products of an "instant," "turn-on", television - oriented culture. They have been trained to want and get it now. You might call them "solid state" students. I'm not sure they are motivated very effectively by future goals.

*Dr. Pitcher is director of Educational Development Center, Berea, Ohio.

Up to now we have considered how a person becomes an underachiever - poor school preparation, personality or psychological problems, working toward underachievement to be independent and also to remain dependent, and possessing poor self-concept and impulse control. But the major question is can he become an achiever?

I think many can.

How?

The approach to the underachiever depends on the nature of the underachievement. There are five assumptions I make as I work with any underachiever.

In the first place, I assume that every student - every person for that matter - is gifted. In part, it is the task of the school to help him find his gift not just to tell him he is gifted. In the second place, I assume that self-concept is learned not inherited. We learn to feel inadequate or inferior. We are not born feeling that way. It is implicit in this assumption that a person's self-concept can be changed.

But how?

Any number of ways. Counseling or therapy - my third assumption is that self-concept can be changed as behavior is changed. As a student is helped to do successfully he can begin to feel successful. In turn, his self-concept improves. There are two other assumptions I make. One is that every student is motivated. There is no such thing as an unmotivated person. The problem occurs when the student's motivation is different from what the teacher or school expects. My fifth assumption is that a student can learn to run his own life responsibly.

By giving him more freedom?

No - actually by providing more structure so he can learn to run his own life rather than be run by his own impulses or by other people.

A few moments ago I mentioned that an approach to the underachiever depended on the nature of the underachievement. What does this mean?

Basically, the two group approaches I have used with underachievers are designed to improve self-concept and develop responsible autonomy. But each group process is designed for a different type of underachiever.

Let us consider first how we might approach the general underachiever, the person like you and me who isn't using his potentiality but would like to be using it more.

At Kendall College, we have been exploring the Human Potential Seminar group process which is structured toward helping normal, healthy, people become more self-affirming, self-motivating and self-determining. We are assuming that as self-concept and self-confidence are improved, we can begin to use our innate potential more fully.

How does the Human Potential Seminar improve self-concept and self-confidence?

Let me describe the process. I think that can make it pretty clear. In the opening phase, each person identifies the chief formative people and experiences throughout his life which have helped make him who he is. In the next phase, individuals acknowledge experiences of satisfaction, success, and achievement in their life and talk about them with other group members. This is a form of self-affirmation. An analysis of those experiences with an instrument we have designed suggests one's unique primary and secondary motivators - information the student can build on for success. As the process unfolds, value clarification, personal strength acknowledgement and short term goal setting are also involved.

What is involved in value clarification that is important for an underachiever?

We assume that values and motivation are closely intertwined. Through value clarification, a person begins to center in on what really matters to him - what his priorities are, and what he wants his life to be like. When we pair short term goal setting with values, a person is helped to run his life responsibly and with purpose. He is determining his own life. Actually, the general underachiever is often most helped by short term goal setting. He begins to see in a matter of days or weeks that he can do a lot if he will give himself the chance to try. Goal setting gives rather quick feedback that can be very reinforcing.

But what about strength acknowledgement - how does that work out?

People look for personal strengths in themselves and in each other. It's hard for many people to do. We are so prone to look for weaknesses in ourself and to be critical of others.

At this point someone should be raising the question, "this Human Potential Seminar sounds good but do you know whether it works?"

We have three kinds of results to cite on the Human Potential Seminar. The results of a 2 year follow-up self-report research study demonstrated that students do, in fact, feel that through the seminar experience they became more self-affirming, self-determining, and self-motivating. In fact, they indicate that the process is one you learn to grow in. As for academic change, grades improved an average of .69 per student, on a 4.0 scale. Roughly that's an upward change from being a C student to getting 2 B's and 1 C. Recently we completed an experimental and control group research design on the Human Potential Seminar. Here too we are encouraged. Persons in the Seminars showed a significant increase on 5 scales of a self-actualization test (Shostrom - Personal Orientation Inventory). They were significantly higher in inner-directedness, self-regard, self-actualizing values, existential application of values and their viewing of man as basically good.

So far, we have talked about an approach to general underachievers like us - kind of normal people. But what about the student we were talking about earlier who underachieves because he wants to demonstrate his independence or retain his dependence on his parents? How would we deal with him? In a sense, we are asking about the hard core, committed underachiever.

To help this kind of person become an achiever, you have to interrupt his attempts to be an underachiever. If he is impulsive we have to provide a structure that assists him in controlling his impulses. If he is rebelling, we want him to face the consequences of what his behavior is saying about him. If he is "copping-out", we must challenge his cop-outs and help him "cop-in".

How do we go about doing this?

At Kendall we have done this through what we have called the Success Group. Basically, this is a small group process that tries to make constructive use of the dependency-independency conflict. The committed underachiever has demonstrated that he is not doing a very good job of running his life. So - on a temporary basis - we want him to be dependent on this group process. Students enter the group on a contractual basis. They actually sign a contract.

They make a written commitment to attend each Success Group, agree that they are working for at least a C average that term, and further agree that any absence from the Success Group will result in immediate exclusion from school.

That sounds awfully tough. Can a committed underachiever make that commitment and keep it?

Most of them do - and they are surprised and pleased when they see that they can. Only 2 out of 55 students have cut a Success Group and been excluded. Of course, some students choose not to take the Success Group at all. They have failed out of school for a variety of reasons and don't choose to try again.

What do we do in a Success Group?

I asked that question recently of a former Success Group student. He answered, "you learn to be a successful person".

But what goes on during the Success Group?

Mainly, we are trying to teach accountability and responsibility for one's own behavior and life. When the group first meets, a general acknowledgement is made by the leader that all persons present have been successful in failing. Failure is seen as the result of deliberate, chosen behavior. The leader then indicates that the purpose of the Success Group is to help students be successful in achieving. That is our only purpose. We are not there to deal with personal or family concerns, health problems, etc. Academic achievement is our only reason for meeting as a group.

What do the students do?

During the first session, students usually do 3 things. First, they compile a list of "cop-outs" or excuses which they have used or could use to avoid achievement, such as, why not go to class, participate, read, do assignments? My current group identified 59 different ways of avoiding success. It really becomes pretty funny after a while when the students realize how expert they have been at planning for failure. The point of this is to show the students that they make decisions, they run their life - they are accountable for whether they succeed or fail. We want them to cop "in" not "cop-out".

What happens next is that students make a written commitment which is posted before the entire group as to the grade point achievement goal they will work toward.

Are their goals realistic?

Rarely. Often they set the goal very, very high. Of course my job is then to test their goal for reality as to how much work they are really willing to do. Talk is easy. Going to class or doing assignments is tough. I want them to have high expectations for themselves, but their work expectations have to be high too.

What do we do about class attendance and assignments?

Each person sets specific goals as to class attendance, participation, and homework for the next few days. The next time the group meets, each goal is reviewed. Cop-outs are challenged. Limits are set. The student is held accountable for the goal he set. If he sets goals and fails in them, he is confronted with the apparent meaning of his behavior. For example, he might be told "you are acting irresponsible. Do you like the word 'irresponsible' to describe who you are? If not, change your behavior." The same kind of thing is done with students who achieve their goals. Either way, we want to provide immediate feedback as to what their behavior is saying and begin helping them get their own feedback.

Dr. Pitcher has indicated that feedback is essential to the kind of underachiever we are talking about now. Does our use of goal setting help with feedback at all?

Definitely - as a student learns first to set short term goals that are specifically measureable, achieveable in a given time span, believeable to him, and decisive, and then begins to achieve them, he provides himself with feedback. He can look at what his goal was and see whether he achieved it. He need not wait for weeks for feedback from a teacher or counselor. He begins to provide it for himself. Of course, the external feedback is reinforcing and helps but for the most part schools are not geared toward giving it.

We also provide limits through rather stringent reality testing. When a student is committed to underachievement, he cannot switch that commitment overnight. Thus, when a student says he read chapter 9 in biology, he may be asked to tell what was discussed in that chapter. If a written assignment is due, he submits a copy of it to the group. Without a copy, we assume the work is undone. This was one of the toughest things I had to learn to do professionally.

That is, checking up on students. My background and training in counseling emphasized trust and permissiveness as acceptance of students. But in my first Success Group, students told me "don't believe us when we tell you we read a chapter, or wrote a paper, or attended a class. Make us prove it." I'm still learning to do it. Every semester I think I've gotten much tougher. But when this last group ended, they said "get tougher earlier in the semester. That's when we need it." I think what they may be saying is that they want some one to provide some consistent limits and boundaries to help them control themselves. It is when I provide such limits that I am really showing acceptance of this underachiever.

Does anything happen to a student's self-concept through these Success Groups?

Yes - although our overall goal is academic achievement, these students often have very poor self-concepts too. I want them to believe in themselves and to like themselves. So we accentuate their successes through the reporting sessions. We ask them to talk about strengths they see in each other and in themselves.

What kind of results do we have with these hard core underachievers?

We have run 5 groups now. Our success ratio is about 72% in terms of academic achievement. We have had several students achieve at a "B" level and one student got all A's. But I think that's only half the story. Five students from my last Success Group voluntered to help lead future success groups. They are externally more self-confident, motivated, responsibly independent and concerned about other students.

I have said a number of things about working with underachievers. But it can all be summed up by returning to the two questions raised at the outset about how the underachiever becomes an underachiever and how he can become an achiever. General underachievement is often the result of a lack of self-confidence or low-self concept. We don't think we can do something, so we prove it by not doing it. The hard core underachiever has often made a commitment to nonachievement so as to feel independent or to maintain family dependency. To turn on underachievers, I have suggested the Human Potential Seminar and the Success Group process. I am not suggesting that underachievers with psychological disturbances or poor

skills preparation should not have a treatment directed to those areas. My area of interest lies more in self-concept development. I find it exciting to work with underachievers toward the goals of self-affirmation, responsible self-determination and self-motivation. The group processes I have described represent two approaches to turning on underachievers.